

By Rick Levin

Cash-strapped and facing new vote-counting disputes over a controversial governor's race, the Washington state legislature convened Monday, Jan. 10, and representatives from the 36th District — which includes Magnolia and Queen Anne — are gathering forces for a long, hard battle.

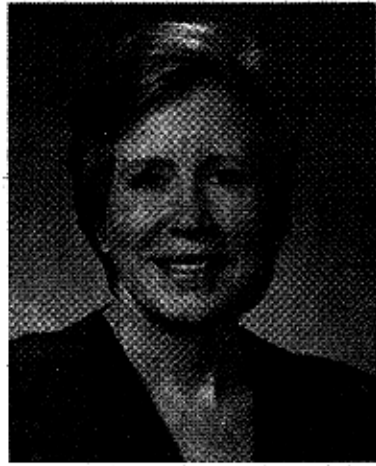
State representatives Mary Lou Dickerson (D-Phinney Ridge) and Helen Sommers (D-Magnolia), along with Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles (D-Queen Anne), say as a group they are entering the new session with a list of priorities that tilt heavily toward bolstering education and strengthening families.

Also high on that list is finding a common solution for the beleaguered Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Project despite a budget shortfall of \$1.6 billion and little expectation of substantial federal funding for the project.

"We will be struggling with a lot of issues," Sommers said of the current legislative session, adding that in recent years a spate of new programs have been introduced without a significant increase in state revenues. "We've seen a pattern of this," Sommers said, who called the budget shortfall a "significant gap" calling for tough decisions.



Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson



Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles



Rep. Helen Sommers

State legislators launch into new session

One problem, she said, is the apparent "disconnect" between recent tax-busting initiatives and the simultaneous need to maintain the status quo in government supported programs — not to mention new projects such as fixing the crumbling viaduct.

To generate further revenues, Kohl-Welles is introducing a bill, SB 5902,

that creates a 2-percent personal income tax to establish an Education Enrichment Account, with receipts for the tax on individuals, estates and trusts to be deposited into an account supporting schools.

"There's this expectation that we [i.e., the Democratic majority] are just going to come in and impose taxes," Kohl-Welles said, pointing out that

much of the problem stems from the "regressive" nature of the tax structure. "I believe the current tax structure is unfair to both individuals and businesses."

Yet, she added, "we're going to have to step up to the plate" in order to generate much-needed revenue to support public programs and projects.

The viaduct

"I think it is incredibly important that we provide the necessary funding for the viaduct, for either option — tunnel or rebuild," Dickerson said. Although she personally favors the rebuild option as the less expensive alternative, she stressed she'll support either one.

"We really have no option," she said of the transportation structure, which has been deemed at-risk for earthquake damage. "The faster we get this done, the better. The overriding concern is getting the work done."

"It's a major concern for us and our constituents," Sommers said, adding that although she also favors the rebuild option — and citing one Magnolia resident who's collected 1,000 signatures supporting it — she, too, will get behind either choice.

"The hope is that for most of the construction, two lanes could stay open," Sommers said. She believes that the rebuild option would offer less disruption because it could be done quicker and in stages. Cost also becomes a consideration, she said, expressing her doubt that the state will be receiving any extra federal funding for the project.

Kohl-Welles echoed her colleagues

In the Legislature: an uphill year

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in saying she will support whichever alternative is approved, despite preferring the tunnel option for "environmental reasons."

Children, youth and families

Dickerson said she will be introducing a handful of bills centering on strengthening and protecting families, including one focusing on the issue of child neglect.

The Raiden Bill — named after Raiden Robinson, a 6-week-old boy who, along with his brother Robinson, starved to death in a Kent apartment while the mother lay passed out surrounded by 307 beer cans — would provide training for social workers as well as revamping the way Child Protective Services processes and handles complaints.

"My legislation would take child neglect more seriously," Dickerson said. "It will cost money," she added, but will prove well worth it in "providing for the well-being of the children."

Another bill would cover partial wage replacement for employees taking family leave in such cases as birth, adoption or serious illness. "Over half of the workers in Washington state have no paid leave," Dickerson said, noting workers' number-one complaint is that they don't have enough time to spend with family members.

Dickerson said the legislation is modeled after a similar bill that passed in California, providing for up to five weeks of paid family leave and funded by premiums and payroll deduction in the same manner that worker-disability insurance currently is funded.

"I believe this will help not only employees but employers who want to do the right thing," Dickerson said.

She also will introduce legislation seeking to "reinvest in youth" by funding intervention programs at the local level — a move Dickerson said will save money by working to keep juveniles from entering the legal system.

Kohl-Welles said she will be introducing a "cluster of legislation" ensur-

ing the safety and well-being of both children and vulnerable adults. The "cluster" tackles a number of hot-button issues, such as the safety and quality of childcare and preschools, making background checks mandatory for any adult in a supervisory role over children. The bill also extends to monitoring abuse by members of the clergy.

She added that the legislation puts tight regulations on such things as mold and toxins in childcare facilities, as well as monitoring the safety of drinking water. "We want to make sure that children and youth are not going to be unsafe," she said.

A gun bill Kohl-Welles is putting forth would focus on "the safe storage of firearms" and would require background checks at gun shows, where many folks apparently succeed in making an end run around the regulations in place for purchasing firearms in gun stores and pawnshops. The bill also would reinstitute the assault-weapons ban recently lifted by Congress.

Education

Sommers said she is entering this legislative session with a deep concern for the state of education, and in particular the disparities between students from differing economic and social strata regarding academic success. "We talk a lot about the achievement gap," she said. "Closing that gap is extremely difficult."

One of the means of bridging the gap, Sommers said, is by taking an early interest in kids; of particular importance, she believes, is getting children reading at an early age.

"That's the key," Sommers said, citing the success of the Kennewick School District, where a K-12 program has kids reading at least two hours a day. Among the new education bills she'll be introducing or supporting is one instituting a similar reading-intensive program.

Dickerson said she also supports building a strong, early-childhood reading program. "There is no reason we couldn't do this in Seattle," she said of the Kennewick model.

Part of the key to improving educational performance rests in understanding that the so-called achievement gap is not necessarily created in schools, Sommers pointed out. She said it is incumbent upon local government and the school district to instill in all parents the importance of reading to children a minimum of 20 minutes a day, from birth on.

Not only is such a system beneficial to students, Sommers said; "the other thing it does is empower the parent."

Funding and revamping of higher education is also well up on Sommers' list of priorities. "We're not preparing our workforce for the new economy," she said. "We are going

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to do better this year."

Kohl-Welles, who chairs the Research, Labor and Commerce Committee, said she also is focused on investing in higher education, particularly in terms of research. The goal, she said, is to create a bevy of highly skilled jobs through strong workforce training, and to keep those jobs in state rather than shipping them overseas to such places as India, where many companies have been taking advantage of the cheaper, hi-tech labor force.

Kohl-Welles said it's important to "look at what we do to strengthen our economy," especially in the area of medical and biotech research facilities — such as, she added, the creation of a local research institute.

Kohl-Welles also is introducing a bill that would amend the recently passed legislation restricting state uni-

versities in using race and ethnicity as a factor in student enrollment. "Diversity is of compelling state interest," she said, noting that her bill would allow race as a factor in enrollment policies.

Health care

Sommer called the increases in health-care costs "out of control," adding that the climb in Medicare cost this year alone was 18.7 percent. "Every state is having deep trouble with health care," she said.

The issue comes back once again to the massive shortfall in the state budget, coupled with programmatic strictures emanating at the national level. "We have lots of rules and mandates from the federal government — and no flexibility," Sommers said.

"Somebody's going to have to make some very tough decisions."